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ABSTRACT

The purposes of this paper are (1) to present a rationale for the investigation of the environments of educational organizations; (2) to examine recent literature on the nature and effectiveness of formal linkages between organizations; (3) to review recent studies, mainly Canadian, on organizational environments, boundary spanning, and interorganizational linkages in the field of education; and (4) to discuss the implications for educational policy formation and implementation. The summary states that education does have ambiguous goals, unclear technologies, and inadequate resources, and that loose coupling is evident within educational organizations. However, according to literature reviewed in the paper, loosely coupled educational organizations respond more effectively to environmental pressures and changes than do tightly coupled ones. (Author)

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ORGANIZATIONAL ENVIRONMENTS, INTERORGANIZATIONAL LINKAGES AND POLICY MAKING IN EDUCATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

by

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Organizational Environments, Interorganizational Linkages and Policy Making in Educational Organizations

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ORGANIZATIONAL ENVIRONMENTS, INTERORGANIZATIONAL LINKAGES AND POLICY MAKING IN EDUCATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

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Literature in the field of public policy has traditionally given prominence to the involvement of the various publics in the process of policy making. Writings in the field of organization theory--a field with which I have greater familiarity--have instead tended to emphasize the internal variables associated with organization decision making. However, recent literature on organizations, including that on educational organizations, is increasingly giving prominence to: (a) the importance of an organization's environment (or, more often environments) for the functioning of the organization; (b) the need for understanding and giving attention to the formal and informal linkages among organizations; (c) the significance of the boundary spanning roles which personnel within the organization play; (d) the importance of temporary systems and other ad hoc arrangements for policy formulation in the organization; and (e) the impact of an organization's technology for (policy) decisions which concern the structure of the organization. Briefly stated, the context of organizations has been shown to have important implications for their overall functioning. Theory and research on organizations has now, perhaps more than ever, considerable relevance for policy makers.

The purposes of this paper are fourfold: (1) to present a rationale which outlines the need to investigate the environments of educational

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organizations; (2) to present several recent notions on the nature and effectiveness of formal linkages between organizations; (3) to review a number of recent studies, mainly Canadian, on organizational environments, boundary spanning and interorganizational linkages in the field of education; and (4) to provide possible implications for educational policy formulation and policy implementation.

Organizational Environments

Ludwig von Bertalanffy (1968), James Miller (1979), and others of the general systems theory movement several decades ago stressed the importance of the suprasystem for the functioning of systems, including social systems. However, the specific nature of suprasystem to system relationships was not accorded the emphasis it is receiving in current writings by the "environmental school" of organization theorists and by the interorganizational writers. Indeed, the writings of Richard Hall (1977), Charles Perrow (1979), Marshall Meyer (1978), Howard Aldrich (1979), John Jackson and Cyril Morgan (1978), Gary Dessler (1980) and other theorists and writers on organizations have moved heavily into this "new" domain.

The effect of environmental factors on the structure of organizations has, for example, been demonstrated in industrial studies carried out by Burns and Stalker (1961), Woodward (1965) and others of the Aston school. In brief, mechanistic administrative structures characterized by highly specialized tasks, centralization and vertical communications were found to be associated with the most stable environments, whereas more flexible, organic structures, where jobs lost much of their formal definition, employees exercised self-control and interactions were lateral as well as vertical, were characteristic of organizations whose environments were changing and complex. These findings give rise to the notion which

Magnusen (1973) labels the environmental imperative, that is, the environment would seem to determine the structure most suited for a particular organization.

Baldridge and Burnham in an article based on a U.S. study completed in the San Francisco Bay area and Illinois, report that, among other influences, "Environmental input from the community and other organizations is a major determinant of an organization's [school's] innovative behavior" (1975:165).

In a case study completed at the University of Alberta, Canada, Kelsey (1973) used an ecological model of organizational constraints, that is one which relates the administrative phenomena under study to the environment in which they occur, to undertake a comparative analysis of the administrative and workflow structures of secondary schools drawn from two different environments, namely, Edmonton, Canada and the West Riding of Yorkshire, England. Data were collected through formal interviews, by examination of documents and using instruments adapted from measures developed by the Aston group of researchers and other instruments constructed by the researcher. Variables related to the administrative structure dimension included functional specialization, formalization of role definition, concentration of authority, and size of supportive component. The dimension of workflow structure, or technology, was measured by the diversification of workflow, and the context dimension included the variable of size, local system, and geographic location, with the latter two variables being controlled by the selection of samples from the two different environments.

Workflow diversification was shown to be comprised of two different dimensions which the researcher labeled Personalization and Acceptance, and these were found to be the most important variables which distinguished

between geographic locations. Kelsey concluded that "the school's internal structures of administrative control are to a large extent 'received' from the local system," thus acknowledging the impact on the school organization of environmental and contextual influences emanating from the local system to which the school belongs. Perhaps the organizational imperative espoused by Magnusen has as much validity for educational organizations as for others.

In another study, MacLeod (1976), using Erving Goffman's (1959) dramaturgic framework which incorporates theatrical and game metaphors, described and analyzed the collective bargaining process between Alberta school boards and bargaining units of the Alberta Teachers' Association. McLeod likened the provincial government to the theatrical producer and the cabinet ministers responsible for education and for labor to the director and co-director respectively, all of whom were seen as very important members of the stage environment who "stage managed" the collective bargaining process from their offstage position. The background environment of social, economic, and political factors, as well as the legal, formal structures that characterize the collective bargaining organization, were seen to influence the process in much the same manner as the stage and backdrop simultaneously constrain and influence actor performance. Onstage roles by various actors including school trustees, school board officials, Alberta School Trustees Association staff, and consultants hired by school boards, were delineated using the ideal-types of star performers, supporting actor, gladiator, and chorus.

McLeod's interesting, and somewhat novel, approach to the study of an educational organization "offers plausible explanations for outcomes that [in other frameworks] are often explainable only in terms of flaws in the participants' capabilities" and also provides further perspectives which

"facilitate understanding of ritual, ceremony, and symbols in modern organizational settings." A major contribution of McLeod's study was the manner in which the theatrical analogy accentuated and emphasized the important influences of environmental factors--in theatrical terms the producer, the director, the stage, and the backdrop--in directing and controlling the organizational process.

The studies by Baldridge and Burnham, Kelsey and McLeod are presented as examples of research which outlines the importance of the organizational environment and environmental variables for the functioning of schools and school systems.

Interorganizational Linkages

The past decade has seen a marked increase in the systematic analysis of interorganizational relationships among human service organizations. Although much of the research in this area has centred on social service agencies, some has focused on educational organizations which involve or require for their mainstream activity the participation of one or more other organizations. An interorganizational relationship exists when two or more organizations exchange resources such as money, physical facilities, clients, staff services, etc. The actions of the cooperating organizations are interdependent, usually for the purpose of performing specialized activities and thereby achieving a goal that is unachievable by these organizations functioning independently. Administrative arrangements having varying degrees of formalization, centralization and complexity are adopted. These form the structural dimensions of the relationship. The process dimensions concern the direction, intensity and variability of resource flows and the direction and intensity of information flows between the cooperating (or competing) agencies (cf. Van de Ven, 1976). Research in

this area has typically given attention either to how and why such relationships among human service organizations develop or to the relationship between varying types of linkages among the interdependent organizations and the perceived effectiveness of the organizations in performing the specialized activities to which the linked organizations contribute.

In a recent study, Michael Andrews (1978), drawing upon ideas put forward by Turk (1973) and Mindlin and Aldrich (1975) and with the use of a conceptual framework borrowed from Marrett (1971), examined a joint cooperative program in the field of post-secondary education. In particular, Andrews, using questionnaires and structured interviews, researched the patterns of interorganizational linkages that existed in four preparation programs for respiratory technologists in Canada and related these to the degree of integration and overall program effectiveness. His review of literature led him to believe that three dimensions could provide a useful basis for analyzing the linkages among organizations: (a) degree of formalization of the relationship between the organizations, (b) degree of intensity of the relationship, and (c) degree of reciprocity between the focal organizations.

Using the three linkage dimensions and their indicators, Andrews investigated the ways in which organizations are joined to each other in providing theoretical and clinical preparation in the allied health area respiratory technology. In addition, he examined the relationship between the interorganizational linkage variables and two measures of program effectiveness, a subjective "perceptual" measure and the performance of students on national registration examinations for respiratory technologists. Although the usual cautions must be exercised in generalizing from the data, at the very least the study appeared to demonstrate that different interorganizational linkage patterns are closely associated with different outcomes, both in terms of objective measures of performance and perceptual assessments of satisfac-

tion with the program. High formalization, high standardization and high relative resource commitment in the interorganizational linkages were found to relate positively to higher student achievement on the national examination. However, these variables were found to relate negatively to student perception of program effectiveness. Andrews reports in private conversation that this finding continued to hold in a follow-up he did this year. Of significance for policy making is the diametrically opposite association between the interorganizational variables and each of the two measures of program effectiveness used in the study.

Tymko (1979) conducted a case study to investigate the formulation and, especially, the implementation of a public policy related to the accreditation of Alberta high schools with a view to providing explanations for apparent differences between expected and actual consequences. Implicit in Tymko's report is the suggestion that possibly the most important factor giving rise to "failure" in policy implementation was the loose coupling between the decision makers in the policy sphere and the implementers in the operations sphere. Policy was apparently established with little cognizance of, or concern for, the problems and practicalities of implementation; policy was implemented with little regard for the global issues and objectives perceived by the politicians and senior administrators. Tymko suggested that the systems management approach, involving well-defined objectives, clearly assigned responsibilities, specification of expected outcomes, and performance accountability, would ensure that effective implementation proceeded from goal-directed, value-maximizing behavior. The implication appears to be for improved, and possibly more formalized, linkages between the policy-makers and the policy-implementers.

Another approach to examining the nature and effectiveness of

various organizational linkages was taken by Young (1979). He examined data relative to the functioning of ad hoc committees in Faculties of Education in three Alberta, Canada, universities as a means of exploring the relationships between selected linkage, process, and implementation variables and the effectiveness of temporary adaptive systems. Data were obtained through the use of questionnaires, interviews, and document analysis. Young found that linkage variables studied could be reduced to four factors--Faculty-Committee linkage factor, Senior Administration/ Faculty of Education Council-Committee linkage factor, Meetings, and Physical Resources--which were positively related to scores for linkage activity effectiveness. The first two of these factors accounted for nearly 72 percent of the linkage activities of the committees. Young recommended strong linkages between the committees and the administrators and between the committee and members of the Faculty as direct means of increasing the effectiveness of ad hoc committees.

With regard to committee processes Young concluded that committees which have low levels of task complexity, well-defined committee procedures, democratic leadership and production of recommendations, as well as committee members characterized by high commitment to the accomplishment of the task within given time lines, high involvement in decision-making within the committee, and a willingness to exert themselves, may have the best likelihood of being characterized as effective. The most significant factor related to implementation was the assessment by committee members of the political feasibility of their recommendations and Young recommended that committee members be directed to give serious consideration to this aspect of their function prior to presentation of the final report.

The findings of Andrews, Tymko and Young, would seem to support each other even though the study which each undertook was conducted in a

substantially different arena using a somewhat different methodology from the others. The nature of the linkages between systems were found in all three cases to relate strongly to measures of organizatinoal effectiveness and policy implementation effectiveness.

A particular type of linkage between organizations or between an organization and its environment is that provided by individuals who perform what has come to be known as the boundary spanning function. The findings of studies on the boundary spanning function are not unlike those concerning interorganizational linkages generally.

Boundary Spanning in Organizations

Boundary spanners, the individuals who serve as information links between organizations or between an organization and its environment, play an important role in disseminating information about the organization to its significant others. This function is labeled "external representation" by Aldrich (1979:249). In addition, they serve a second function, that of information processing, that is, collecting relevant information from the environment, particularly when the latter is in a state of change and unpredictability. In education, boundary spanning typically is part of the role set for administrative personnel and is certainly an important responsibility of those who are at the nexus of communications for the organization. The more complex the organization, the greater the number of individuals involved in performing the boundary spanning role (Van de Ven, 1976).

The report by Michael Tushman (1977) of his study of a large U.S. R and D facility supports the literature on boundary spanning in that it mentions special boundary roles which had evolved to link the innovative organization's internal network to external sources of information. Tushman's

extensive review of related literature and his research underline the importance of boundary roles and the need for effective communication across the organization's boundary, especially in the case of innovative organizations.

Implications for Policy Making

To this point, this paper has reviewed some current thinking and related studies concerning organizational environments, interorganizational linkages and boundary spanning with particular reference to the field of education. The tentative nature of the findings of the studies reviewed--for the usual research reasons--suggests that generalizations based on them should be drawn with caution. Acknowledging this limitation, several generalizations are identified below and some possible implications for policy making in education specified.

1. The environmental imperative appears to be operative in educational as well as other settings in that environmental inputs from the community and from other organizations would seem to be major determinants of: a school's internal administrative control structures; (b) a school's innovative behavior; and (c) a school district's collective bargaining processes.

The need for policy makers to be "in touch" with various aspects of the environment of their organization appears self-evident and in this respect the studies reported seem merely to confirm the obvious. Perhaps more important is the procedure for ensuring an adequate two-way flow of information between the school system and its various publics. In this connection, the work of Weinhauer (1979) and Nussbaumer (1977) may be relevant.

Weinhauer investigated environmental relations activities in three

private colleges in Western Canada in order to determine the effectiveness and awareness of environmental relations activities as perceived by selected publics associated with each college. Among the findings, mass media information flow was regarded as least effective by all publics, with paper information flow viewed more positively, and the off-campus activities involving students and staff and campus visitations perceived to be most effective.

Nussbaumer, using an historical case study method, examined developments in post-secondary education in Alberta, Canada for the four-year period preceding and four-year period following the 1972 report of Alberta's Commission on Educational Planning. She attempted to relate policy developments to those recommendations of the commission report which concern provincial government structures for post-secondary education. Nussbaumer found that some consolidation of institutions of post-secondary education and some reorganization of governing structures for these institutions had begun prior to the release of the report which recommended consolidation and reorganization in this area. More changes occurred following the election of a new government especially ones concerning reorganization. Nussbaumer concluded, however, that the use of ad hoc procedures at the provincial level in the form of this particular temporary system--a government commission--may be as much a symbolic approach to policy making as a real approach, in that the recommendations made may not have been the key factors in initiating the changes: these might have been introduced in any case. Of particular relevance to this paper is her finding that the commission hearings and the report served as means for articulating and publicizing needs and problems t[illegible] the heavy involvement of interested persons and the public-at-large [illegible]l as serving to focus the developments already in progress.

2. Different interorganizational linkage patterns develop between cooperating educational organizations and these seem to be closely associated with different student outcomes. High degrees of formalization of the linkages would seem to relate positively to "objective" measures of student achievement. As educational institutions become increasingly involved with other agencies in sponsoring joint cooperative educational programs, in response to the demands for increased variety and sophistication of program offerings, policy makers in these institutions should be aware of the constraints inherent in, and implications of, these programs. Among such programs--which involve two or more organizations--are the growing numbers of secondary school work-study programs, the myriads of apprenticeship programs, and the semi-professional and professional preparation programs. In Andrews' words,

> Administrators of [such] joint cooperative programs should ensure that accountability and responsibility mechanisms are established for all aspects of the program . . . [since] the basis of the interorganizational relationship will affect the ways in which the individuals in the program perform their tasks (1978:275-6).

3. The nature of the coupling between the policy development system or subsystem and the policy implementation agency would seem to be a major variable in accounting for differences between the expected and actual consequences of new policy. Policy implementation appeared less than successful where the linkage between decision makers in the policy formulation sphere and implementers in the operations area was found to be weak. Again, as with the interorganizational area, the implications for policy are that implementation effectiveness will be higher if the linkages between policy makers and policy implementers are strong and regard is given for the problems and practicalities of implementation at the policy formulation stage.

Also important for successful policy implementation--at least in teacher preparation programs--would seem to be certain characteristics pertaining to the policy-making body. These are: (a) well-defined committee procedures and a low level of task complexity; (b) high involvement in decision making within the committee; (c) willingness on the part of committee members to exert themselves, for example, in completing the task within the given time lines; and, most significant of all, (d) ability of committee members to judge the political feasibility of their policy recommendations.

4. Different measures of program effectiveness can lead to markedly different conclusions being drawn about the performance of an organization as Andrews' study of college-hospital programs revealed. Student perceptions of program effectiveness--probably a satisfaction measure--can be at considerable variance with a performance measure such as achievement on a national examination. The implications for policy developers are manifold. For example, it is reasonable to assume that programs which stress student satisfaction may do so at the expense of productivity.

Another implication is put forward by Andrews himself. He states,

> Notwithstanding the difficulties posed for those who must interpret the results, there would seem to be a need for administrators to utilize multiple criteria approaches to the evaluation of joint cooperative programs (1978:277).

Having adopted this approach, the policy maker should also see to it that these programs are monitored carefully and frequently.

In conclusion, as research and theorizing in our field expand to include the new tongue twisting vocabulary, with ethnology, ethnomethodology and phenomenology becoming part of the everyday language of students and practitioners as well as of professors of educational administration, another interesting notion is receiving prominence in the literature on

human service organizations. We learn from Karl Weick in that insightful 1976 article that educational organizations are loosely coupled systems with each part in large measure semiautonomous rather than tightly linked to other parts. And, although we may have forgotten that Charles Bidwell (1965) said much the same thing a decade or so earlier in describing the structural looseness of educational organizations, we nod our heads gravely in approval. Yes, education does have ambiguous goals, unclear technologies and inadequate resources, and there are conflicting motives among its personnel. Loose coupling is evident within educational organizations; it is even more evident among school districts, among provinces and states, and, especially, among countries. This notion could cause us to despair: it would seem to invalidate most of the suggestions made in this paper. However, we are told by John Meyer and Brian Rowan that "loosely coupled educational reorganizations structurally respond more effectively to environmental pressures and changes than do tightly coupled organizations" (1978:105), and this gives us some reassurance. It was this looseness in structure that made it possible for our gathering here in Brazil. And, speaking for one, I'm glad to be in this new environment. But, in the final analysis, we would not have arrived if there had not been for some interorganizational structures, temporary systems and a number of boundary spanners working in our behalf to get us here.

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